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SUBJECT: ELECTION SNAPSHOT: SARKOZY AND ROYAL STILL THE
ONES TO BEAT

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SUMMARY

11. (U) Nine weeks from the first round of France's 2007 presidential election, Segolene Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy still dominate the field of presidential hopefuls. They remain strong favorites to win, on April 22, the first round of the Presidential elections. That said, French voters have a long and distinguished record of confounding the conventional wisdom. Two candidates have positioned themselves as alternatives to the two leading candidates: Centrist Francois Bayrou, who has enjoyed a recent surge of interest and rising poll numbers, and right wing extremist Jean-Marie Le Pen, who at 78 years old, is making his last run at the Presidency. Each currently enjoys the support of about 15 percent of the electorate (about half of Royal's and Sarkozy's). Le Pen's support appears stable; Bayrou's has been growing. In France's two-round presidential election system, in which well over a dozen candidates can be on the ballot in the first round, small differences in first-round vote tallies can make a big difference in which two candidates make it into the second round. That said, the electoral base and organizational strength provided by the two main parties continue to strongly favor Sarkozy's and Royal's chances. A continuing steady rise of Bayrou, and a poll-hidden reservoir of support for Le Pen could still conceivably put one or the other over the top -- but only if one of the two leading candidates should suffer an unforeseeable tanking of his or her electability. End Summary.

BLIZZARD OF POLLS OBSCURING THE BASICS?

12. (U) The French addiction to incessant polling, along with a media-saturated environment that whips every micro-movement in polling results into a major news story, has recently given the French public the impression of vertiginous movement in the prospects of their presidential candidates, when in fact the relative standing of the candidates remains anchored in well-established features of the political landscape. The strength of French voters' identification of themselves as "left" or "right" has eroded during the past decade, but it still structures the electorate into two contending political sensibilities, to the benefit of France's only two relatively large political parties, the center-left Socialist Party (PS) and the center-right Union

for a Popular Movement (UMP) party.

¶3. (U) Both these parties are riven by ideological factionalism and leadership rivalries; but, the necessity of unity, if their candidate is not to risk elimination in the first round, is a trumping antidote. The candidates of these two parties, respectively, Poitou-Charentes Region President Segolene Royal and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy continue to tower over the field, and to benefit from the much greater financial strength and organizational depth of their parties.

¶4. (U) Any other result April 22 than a second-round face-off between the candidate of the center-left and that of the center-right would be a big surprise -- requiring either a recrudescence of the "anomaly" of Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the extremist, right-wing National Front (FN), in the second round (as in 2002), or a tectonic restructuring of the French electorate to the benefit of the centrist, Union for French Democracy (UDF) party and its maverick leader Francois Bayrou. Currently, campaign coverage is giving prominent play to both Le Pen's persisting strength at about 15 percent of first-round voters, and to Bayrou's current spike in the polls to over double the nearly 7 percent he garnered in the first round in 2002. Le Pen has not yet collected the 500 signatures from elected officials needed to get on ballot; should he fail to do so (very unlikely in the view of most observers) by the March 16 deadline, this would put a significant bloc of potential swing voters up for grabs.

¶5. (U) In some polls, Bayrou has surpassed Le Pen, and is within sight of the 20 percent mark; Bayrou himself has confidently predicted, "Within a month, I'll be ahead of Segolene." Le Pen has taken about 15 percent of the first round vote in the last three presidential elections (2002, 1995, and 1988); most observers expect he will again put on a similar showing in 2007. Ironically, should Le Pen again make it into the second round, he is again certain to lose against any other leading candidate; whereas, should Bayrou make it into the second round, he has a good chance of

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winning against any other leading candidate.

¶6. (U) But the determination of the election's two "third men" to reach the second round and upset the apple cart of the two leaders, and the press coverage that suspensefully presents their respective strategies for doing so, minimizes both voters' wariness of repeating the fluke that catapulted Le Pen into a run-off against President Chirac in 2002, as well as the campaign clout in coming weeks of the two leading parties' dense and nationwide political organizations. As campaign organizations, the UDF and the FN are not in the same league as the PS and UMP. According to experienced observers of French presidential races, this should make a big difference in the final weeks of the campaign when a large number of voters will at last make up their minds.

¶7. (U) That Royal and Sarkozy are being tested by the rigors of presidential campaign for the first time has prompted some -- Bayrou, for one -- to question if one or the other will not break under the pressure. Bayrou, like Le Pen, has run for president before (in 2002). He has been through what he calls the "the wringer" of a presidential race and its invasive scrutiny, but Royal and Sarkozy have not. Indeed, the newness of Royal and Sarkozy to presidential politics is part of the reason they have been successful in epitomizing change. They remain the dominant candidates for now, and they hold the high cards of organizational wherewithal for staying there. Though neither has a track record of holding up through what is the long and grueling, and brutally revealing, race for the French presidency, there is no reason now to believe that both will not hold up all the way through to their long-expected, second-round face-off May 6. Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

